

Special Study

THE EXISTENTIAL / NEO-ORTHODOX PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

An attempt will be made, in this comparatively brief study, to focus on the Neo-Orthodox / Existential philosophy of history. To this end we shall endeavor to show a few of the antecedent influences leading to this particular view of history; a definition of this philosophy of history; results of this philosophy of history. Basic to an understanding of any aspect of the Existential theology (if indeed it may be called a theology) is recognition of its reactionism toward a religion that presents itself to man's reason for verification. The Crisis theology is also a reaction against what its adherents call, "immanentism." To them the orthodox theology of a God revealing Himself in the realm of the phenomenal (ordinary history) means an immanentistic, pantheistic theology and restricts God. It claims to be an enemy of rationalism but in our opinion it enthrones rationalism more authoritatively than any of the rationalists and restricts God as orthodoxy could never do. Their constant demand is for a "wholly Other" God—beyond the realm of reasonableness and human history and in so doing they make man's emotions the exclusive point of contact with a God that, by their own declaration, cannot be contacted.

By their arbitrary, authoritarian and dogmatic postulate that a revelation from God is not verifiable by the logical processes of man they have enthroned their "inability to know" which is really enthroning rationalism. Basically, Existentialism is nothing more than a modified agnosticism all dressed up in the robes of religious terminology.

We hope, in all fairness, that we have represented their position correctly. With our background of orthodoxy and ordinary view of history it has not been easy to follow their thinking to clear conclusions.

Antecedents

The antecedents of the existential philosophy of history may be traced back with certainty to Immanuel Kant and other rationalistic philosophers, and perhaps even further back into the age of Platonism. But we shall not go beyond Kant. We feel rather reluctant to criticize Kant; considering our very brief acquaintance with his work, but it is necessary to do so to see his influences upon modern theological

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trends. We therefore accept the interpretations of other writers concerning his epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions. The educational background of Barth (German school of rationalism) and the ethnic relationship of Barth and Kant (both German) lead us to believe that Kant had a strong influence upon Barth's theology.

There is no doubt that Kant's ideas concerning the way man arrives at and interprets his natural experiences contain some truth. But when it comes to the metaphysical (that which is beyond the natural) Kant becomes an agnostic. He maintains that metaphysical knowledge about the general characteristics of reality is *impossible* to attain. If we seek inside ourselves for what is the Cause (caps mine) of, or the basis of, our mental machinery of forms and categories, we are unable to discover anything. Similarly, when we try to move beyond the phenomenal world (ordinary history), to the realm of "things-in-themselves" (brute fact), we are again unable to discover the Cause.

Kant believes that "the difficulty which prevents us from developing any metaphysical knowledge is that we have no way of determining if our mental apparatus is applicable to anything beyond the world of possible experience, the phenomenal world. We possess no concepts, no forms of intuition, no logical schema, that we have any reason to believe apply to the Self, or to the 'things-in-themselves', the real objects that may exist beyond the world of appearance."¹ Thus Immanuel Kant arbitrarily decides that God, if there is a God, could not reveal Himself to man for man has no way of categorizing or understanding that which is beyond the phenomenal (brute fact). Either this or Kant believes that God has not the ability to communicate the noumenal (that is, non-empirical world) through the phenomenal.

Kant further posited that "our logical forms and our categories are organizing principles . . . which allow us to acquire *a priori* knowledge about the world of appearance," but ". . . cannot be extended to tell us about a possible transempirical world, unless we could discover some means of determining whether the metaphysical realm can and must be thought of in the same way as the phenomenal one."² In other words, our own reason becomes the criteria of judgment as to whether God is able to reveal Himself to man in man's own categories or not.

1. *Philosophy Made Simple*, Popkin & Stroll, Doubleday & Co., Inc., p. 97.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

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There is that element of truth within Kant's philosophy that ought to be appreciated. It is true in a certain sense that man could not know God by reason alone nor through his experience with the world about him. But that does not preclude the possibility of God revealing Himself to man in man's categories to a degree sufficient for man to accept by faith what is unknowable but revealed. It appears that Kant has written revelation off as impossible simply by making his own reason the judge. And thus Kant gives to the existentialists the first faint echoes of the necessity for the "wholly Other" God and the autonomous man.

Dialecticism is the other important antecedent with the Crisis theologians. This form of rationalism had its beginnings in Plato but Hegel is responsible for organizing the dialectical philosophy into its influential position among philosophers. The dialectic proceeds: All change, especially historical change, takes place in accordance with the law of the dialectic: a thesis is produced, it develops an opposition (*its antithesis*), a conflict between them ensues, and the conflict is resolved into a synthesis which include both thesis and antithesis. "Hegel believed that in discovering the dialectic he had discovered a *necessary law* of nature."³ Men and nations are merely pawns of historical necessity—it is really the dialectic which controls the course of events. Hegel's philosophy is very near pure pantheism. His "Absolute Mind" (God) becomes the real universe, manifesting itself outwardly as world history, and inwardly as the rational dialectical process, "marching toward full self-realization."

For Hegel the historical process proceeds from level to level through the dialectic movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. All change, all thinking and all life proceed from affirmation to denial, or from claim to counter claim to a new integration which later develops a new opposition. Development takes place in "Waltz-time"—"One, two, three; one, two, three."

Hegel holds that fundamental principles of law, morality, and social institutions of art, religion, and philosophy are connecting stages in the logical evolution of the rational will. The dialectical movement of progress through conflict runs through everything he wrote. This dialectical movement is observable in things and in thought, in the human mind and in all history. His idea of conflict is very apparently carried over into the existential ideas of negation and

3. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

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crisis. To Hegel, the "Absolute" was the sum total of all things in their development—it was reason itself, it was Mind, and it was the metaphysical definition of God.

Kierkegaard, father of existentialism, was influenced by the Kantian epistemology and the Hegelian dialectic. Kierkegaard vehemently opposes Hegel's "System" and pretends to set off his forms of dialecticism in sharp distinction from those of Hegel. But SK is a dialecticist, nevertheless. Both Hegel and SK deny that all facts are under the control of the logic of an antecedent God. "With respect to the theologian's (SK's) concept of God as an eternal and unchanging Being, we can see that it would be logically impossible for God to be part of the historical world. By definition, no historical or temporal properties apply to God. If one believed that God existed in time, that God was able to act in human historical situations, one would be believing something that is logically absurd."⁴

God cannot make Himself known. Man cannot reach God from any point in history. Yet man must contact God. Thus we have the dialectical conflict and we must take the irrational leap trying to reach the synthesis. The Unknown is a torment to man—yet it is also an incitement. "God is the wholly Unknown, yet Reason may prepare for His coming."⁵ As one writer has said, Kierkegaard has "improved on Kant's concept of correlativity and Hegel's concept of mediation (both assumed that phenomenal logic and fact are independent of God) by making timeless logic more timeless, by making brute fact more brute, and by developing new speeds for the shuttle train service (SK's "Inwardness" and "Leap") between them,"⁶ (parentheses mine). Both SK and Hegel reject the Christian concept of a self-sufficient God—both reject the idea of the counsel of God, according to which history is simply, what it is. Such concepts to them destroy true "inwardness" and require men to accept that which is alien to them because it is above them. History as the Christian knows it petrifies subjectivity according to these theologians. Objective proof is taken to be an enemy of true faith because it claims to deal with certainties and finished quantities. But the true subjective thinker, the dialecticist, is constantly occupied in striving—seeking the conflict or arriving at the Crisis. Finality at any point must at all costs be

4. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

5. *The New Modernism*, by C. Van Til, Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., Phila., Penna., p. 61.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 62

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avoided. "Dialecticism is irrationalistic in its assumption of "brute fact" and rationalistic in its virtual ascription of legislative power to the human mind over the whole field of possibility (dialectical process),"⁷ (parentheses mine).

In his commentary on Romans, Barth simply carries on where Kierkegaard left off in the dialectic. According to Barth, every attempt to come to God directly by means of ordinary history must be condemned. The relation of man to God must be dialectical subjectivity. Truth is to be found by "inwardness." Unable to find universality (reality) by means of external history, Barth's Individual finds it in himself by means of "inwardness." The Individual is said to be dependent on nothing outside himself. The Individual which disowns all rationality and universality outside himself claims to have these qualities within himself. Barth says on one hand that faith cannot hold on to any content that comes to it from without itself and thus shows his irrationality. But when on the other hand he says, "faith is, as it were, creative of divinity," then he is relegating to man the ability to conjure up his God dialectically, and he shows his rationalism. This coincides with Kierkegaard's idea that truth exists solely in the subjective, personal certainty of the believer.

Thus the Crisis theologians have built their theology upon two assumptions of humanistic philosophy. First, the "wholly Other" God, the "Unknowable" realm of "brute fact" which is beyond rationality. Secondly, the autonomous Individual who finds truth subjectively—who comes to true "inwardness" and self-realization through the rational, dialectical process which leads to the conflict and the "leap." These assumptions directly affect the New-orthodox/Existential philosophy history.

Philosophy of History

Some philosophies of History:

Providential view of History: The Hebraic/Christian view - History and civilization are viewed as under the control and moving toward the purpose of the Divine Being, God.

Theory of world cycles: Seneca - believed that human life is periodically destroyed and that each new cycle begins with a

7. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

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golden age of innocence and simplicity. The arts, inventions and later the luxuries lead to vice and deterioration. Fate or, the fixed order of the universe, must be accepted with resignation.

Corrupting influence of Civilization: Rousseau - human nature is good, yet men and human society are evil. Mankind deteriorates as civilization advances. The soul of man is corrupted as the science and the arts become more perfect. Misery has increased as man has departed from the simpler, primitive conditions.

History as the expression of reason or spirit: Hegel - worked out an elaborate metaphysics of history in terms of monistic idealism. He believed that reality is spirit manifesting itself in nature, in human history and in the actions of man. History is the development of spirit which expresses itself through successive stages. When spirit reaches the stage of rational freedom, it is fully conscious. World history does not belong to the realm of matter but to the realm of spirit. Whereas the essence of matter is gravity, the essence of spirit is rational freedom. Reason in history, rather than providential interventions marks the transition from Augustine to Hegel.⁸

There are other philosophies of history which may have affected the Neo-orthodox philosophy of history:

Historical nihilists: Those who deny that there is any meaning, pattern or purpose in history.

Historical skeptics: Those who assert that we do not know whether or not there is a pattern or purpose in history.

Historical subjectivists: Those who claim that any pattern which seems to be present in historical development is not actually present in history but is merely a creation of human minds or imaginations.⁹

The foregoing philosophies of history are introduced merely to show that the Neo-orthodox concept of history is absolutely foreign to the Christian or Biblical concept of history. As we shall see the Neo-orthodox philosophy of history is more anti-historical, Kantian-critical, Hegelian-pantheistic than anything else. Barth's usage of the

8. *Living Issues in Philosophy*, H.H. Titus, 2nd ed., American Book Co., 1953, pp. 457-459.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 456.

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idea of what he calls "primal history" has its origin in Kant. Barth's ideas of the Individual and of "primal history" are inseparable. The Individual, according to Barth, has true universality within himself. That is, he is not dependent upon anything external. God, therefore, does not speak to the Individual directly through history. If God is to appear to man in history (and He must, for even Barth is able to see that man cannot save himself), it must be in another sort of history. This other sort of history is called "primal history."

Kant's critical system begins with the assumption of the non-createdness of man. The Self is wholly free or autonomous. Human thought is creative in character. The world of history becomes the training ground of the Self. In history the Self attempts to make a never-ending progress toward its self-chosen or created Ideal. Of course, Kant is not speaking here of the "empirical-self." The empirical-self must be thought of as subject to nature and history. BUT THEN, THE EMPIRICAL-SELF IS NOT THE *REAL SELF*, according to Kant. The Autonomous-self is the *real self*. And to be the real self, it must be free.

It is with this notion of the *homo noumenon* that Kant approaches historic Christianity. Naturally he cannot accept historic Christianity as final—if he did the idea of the *homo noumenon* progressing toward its self-chosen Ideal would be lost. In historic Christianity it is God who creates nature and history; in Kant's critical philosophy it is the autonomous man that creates both. Kant accepts the accounts of historical Christianity as being merely figurative, symbolic pictures made by the free moral Self. "Christ is merely the archetype of man's disposition in all its ideal purity."¹⁰ Christ, for Kant, is not simply the revelation of God Incarnate affecting the "empirical self" of man. He is the Ideal which reason sets before itself. For Kant, no historical revelation, whether by word (Scripture) or by fact (Christ), can be taken at face value. Revelation is basically no more than a figure of speech by which reason (the autonomous man) goads itself toward its self-chosen Ideal. Because of the limits of the reach of reason, reason therefore must resort to what Kant calls the "schematism of analogy." It is this "schematism of analogy" that Kant finds in Scripture. Now it is quite incomprehensible how mankind should have set such a perfect Ideal for itself as Christ—therefore it is quite proper for the Bible to speak "analogically" of this Ideal as "coming down" to man.

10. *The New Modernism*, by C. Van Til, p. 85.

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We must look briefly at the philosophies of Franz Overbeck concerning history, for Barth urges his followers to listen to what Overbeck has to say on the idea of "primal history." Overbeck sees the realm of primal history as the realm of origins. It is the realm where the Individual is confronted with pure contingency (that is, where no distinctions are discernable between the universal and the particular). When the subject operates (through the subjective leap) in the field of primal history, he is said to stand outside of empirical history and to be functioning in the realm of pure contingency. Ordinary, empirical history is the realm of relativities and correlativities. If we are to have contact with the Absolute (God) it must be in non-historical or super-historical dimension. The true man in man is, according to Overbeck, above the passage of time and unaffected by an empirical historic Christianity. The true man (the real man, the soul) is, like Plato's man, a member of an ideal world. True Christianity, says Overbeck, appears in the realm of primal history. To seek true Christianity in the realm of empirical history is to make it subject to the manipulations of men, for in the realm of empirical history man is supreme. Here he makes his distinctions and differentiations relative to himself. It is the territory which he may call his own. He is lord in this realm because in it he merely deals with himself. All historical interpretation must be subjective because the relations of things as they appear to us in time (ordinary history) concern that side of things which belong to us and which are, in fact, our own creation. It is only when we turn to primal history that man can really meet God. These men simply deny that God influences the history of the world, as we know it, at all.

Empirical history, says Overbeck, tells no consistent tale. "It is full of sound and fury without intelligible meaning." The world simply is what it is without any reason in it that we can see. But man as a living organism is always subject to the ambiguities of the temporal, while man as the subject of thought (the real man) is able to transcend time itself and thus the ambiguities disappear. Man just thinks all the ambiguities of history away through the subjective process. To bring Christianity into alliance with empirical history is, to Overbeck, to admit that it is of this world and that it partakes of the ambiguities of this world. If history as a whole tells no intelligible tale, it follows that there can be no special turning-points in it that have particular meaning. Thus in Overbeck's system there is no sense in asking about the origin of temporal history or about the end of

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history, or about the Christ of history. For him, in history, nothing is ever finished.

Now let us see how these agnostic and rationalistic ideas are further developed in Barth. Barth's conception of primal history is very similar to that of Overbeck. Both negatively criticize ordinary, empirical history and follow with a "gospel" of hope through primal history. "But Barth gives far greater emphasis to the positive element than Overbeck did . . . as a traffic director he beckons vigorously, lest men go down the road of historical relativity."¹¹ Barth says of temporal history that "for all its competence it is not history, but photographed and analyzed chaos." To think of Christianity or salvation as apprehensible within historical relativities (ordinary history) would inevitably bring Christianity or truth to an ultimate death. In history we can never expect to meet God. At least, we shall never meet a God who is really other than ourselves. Barth argues that to think of God as creating the world in time is to "reduce God's transcendence to the level of a mere link in the chain of immanent causes."

"The gospel is not merely other and higher than history; it is the contradiction of history."¹² The righteousness manifested to the world in Christ-Ideal is timeless and transcendental and unambiguous; the history of relativities—of the world—is ambiguous. The Christ-Ideal through whom sin is removed from the world has no historical existence. Within history, Jesus as the Christ can be understood only as Myth, or as Kant would say, "schematic analogy."

It is just here that Barth's dialecticism begins to show itself. He believes that "it is the idea of pure contingency (primal history) as the correlative to the idea of absolutely comprehensive rationality (empirical history) that must do the saving work."¹³ In other words, there is no way to God from history by way of negation, and, on the other hand, the only way to God is the way of negation. The very meaninglessness of history constitutes its meaning. By the contradictory and ambiguous character of history, the Individual is driven to despair; just because he is driven to despair; he sees the exit, or, ". . . minus times minus equals plus," and we have the Crisis. "He beholds the marvelous fact that the contradictory (the nature of ordinary or phenomenal history) which held him encased in the mazes

11. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

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of correlativity is the power by which he breaks through to the realm of the incommensurable."¹⁴ Notice where the *power* is said to reside! The power unto salvation is in man's capacities to discern and reason (apart from a revelation of God). When the Individual has sensed the true meaninglessness of history and sought with passion the God of pure negation, he has also found the positive relation of God to the world.

When we have stressed the meaninglessness of history with all our power, we begin to understand that the positive relation between God and man, which is the absolutely paradoxical, exists. It is hopeless to reach the Christ by ordinary history. But we reach Him easily when, by faith(?), we are ready to leap into the void. "The true Christ, the Christ not subject to history, the Christ of paradox, is seen with the eye of faith alone . . . and faith deals with that which is beyond all the differentiations of history."¹⁵

The value of history lies beyond history, in primal history. It lies in the CRISIS within which all history stands, in the "sickness unto death." In primal history our relationship with Christ becomes contemporary. It is a relationship or contact with Him which lies beyond the scope of man's empirical self. Thus fundamentalists need not defend the historicity of the gospel narrative, and critics accomplish nothing by trying to destroy it; by faith we are always contemporary (face to face) with the Christ-Ideal by living within the Moment.

According to Barth, there may or may not have been a resurrection of Jesus in empirical or ordinary history. But he is not concerned with this primarily. It is the true resurrection (in the realm of primal history) that we must see. The true resurrection must be found in the subjective Moment. It is in the Moment—the subjective leap which Barth equates with faith—that we become contemporary with Christ's resurrection. As Van Til says, "by faith the believer (according to Barth) enters as it were into an airplane and by means of it transcends the mediation of history." But anyone, wherever he may be, can take to the air in this wholly subjective airplane. If no one is dependent upon any historically mediated gospel content, all men are equally unable and equally able to come to Christ in the airship Subjectivity.

"The oracles of God are the comprehensible signs of the incomprehensible truth that, though the world is incapable of redemption,

14. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

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yet there is a redemption for the world.”¹⁶ Any man anywhere may hear these oracles through the Moment (subjective leap). These oracles of God are not dependent upon objective testimonial reporting. The truth reached through the “leap” can neither be taught nor handed down by testimony. The past is, as it were, dead, and has no message for us, for “the meaning of every epoch in history is directly related (or contemporary) to God.”

Notice how Barth’s philosophy of history contradicts orthodoxy’s concepts of history. According to Orthodoxy, nature and history reveal the mind of God; for Barth nature and history are the results of the creative mind of man. For Orthodoxy God reveals Himself directly in history; for Barth, history is primarily the revelation of the ambiguities of mankind. Orthodoxy believes the Scriptures contain the direct revelation of God and His will made known to sinners; for Barth, the Scriptures contain a necessarily mythological statement of the ideas of primal history. For the believer in historic Christianity, Adam was the first historical man who first truly knew and loved God and then forsook Him; for Barth, Adam is an idea by which every man may picture to himself his existence as it comes into being through the Moment. For Orthodoxy redemption was accomplished by Christ in history; for Barth, redemption is not a matter accomplished *for* man in history, but *by* man in utter freedom from history.

Barth’s adoption of the Kantian and Hegelian philosophies did not lead him to a really transcendent, wholly-Other God, but instead, his dialectical theology inevitably led him to a religion which was immanentistic and a God which was merely the self-chosen Ideal of the would-be autonomous man.

Barth contends that all history is, strictly speaking, no more than a promise. The apostles were no closer to the fulfillment of revelation than the prophets. The witnesses of the resurrection still deal with the promise only. To be a true witness of the resurrection is not to preach matters of historical tradition, but to point beyond history to primal history. A true faith will not build its house upon the quicksands of ordinary history. Since there is no objective revelation within phenomenal history, Barth contends, there is no historical subject that might receive such a revelation. The empirical man is not the real man. Barth contends whole heartedly for the distinction

16. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

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between the empirical, temporary self and the real Individual, the man within man. This is the Self that believes and obeys the revelation of God (which is reached in the Crisis—the Moment) and consequently this Self cannot be a historical self. Barth does not deny, of course, that there is such a thing as an empirical self. What he contends is that this empirical self or historical-consciousness has nothing to do with the Word of God. The empirical self turns about in this world of surface phenomena (relative History) as a rat in a maze.

Here is how Van Til explains Barth's dialectical philosophy of history:

It is in the realm of primal history that the dialectical union between God and man takes place. Revelation is primal history . . . this means that history (ordinary history) is not revelation. Primal history is a dimension that lies as it were between super-history and ordinary or surface history, while yet it impinges on both. Revelation is super-history in the sense that there is eternal happening in God Himself. On the other hand, revelation is also ordinary history. Yet it is neither in super-history nor in ordinary history that God meets man. It is in the tension between the two that revelation takes place, and it is this tension that constitutes the realm of primal history. It is here that God meets man in person. Ordinary history points to primal history and primal history constitutes the meaning of ordinary history. Primal history is the realm of meaning inasmuch as it is the realm of the Logos (what Barth does with John 1:1-18 must be neat). This realm is free from ordinary historical continuity; its unity is that of contemporaneity. It is history but it works directly on men of nearest and farthest times. Men become partners in primal history and, when they are such, they are members of the Church of Christ.¹⁷

And so the great rationalism of Barth stands out prominently in all that he says. Barth's Individual is after all saved by a revelation that is exclusively internal and subjective in character. His wholly-Other God proves not to be so wholly-Other as he would have us believe, but is contingent with the consciousness of the autonomous man.

17. Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1947), pp. 154-155.

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That Barth's successors maintain the same philosophy of history, may be established by a few quotations from Reinhold Niebuhr.

Theological literalism also corrupts the difficult eschatological symbols of the Christian faith. In these the fulfillment of life is rightly presented, not as a negation but as a transfiguration of historical reality. If they are regarded as descriptions of a particular end in time, the real point of the eschatological symbol is lost. It ceases to symbolize both the end and the fulfillment of time, or to point to both the limit and the significance of historical development as the bearer of the meaning of life.

In the same manner a symbolic historical event, such as the "fall" of man, loses its real meaning when taken as literal history. It symbolizes an inevitable and yet not a natural corruption of human freedom. It must not, therefore, be regarded either as a specific event with which evil begins in history nor yet as a symbol of the modern conception of evil as the lag of nature and finiteness.

In a similar fashion the affirmation of the Christian faith that the climax of the divine self-revelation is reached in a particular person and a particular drama of his life, in which these particular events become revelatory of the meaning of the whole of life, is falsely rationalized so that the Jesus of history who is known as the Christ by faith is interpreted as an inhuman and incredible personality with alleged powers of omniscience within the conditions of finiteness. In this way the ultimate truth about God and His relation to men, which can be appropriated only in repentance and faith, is made into a "fact" of history.

These errors of a literalistic orthodoxy tend to obscure the real issues between Christianity and modern culture as surely as the premature capitulation of liberal Christianity to modern culture. The Christian truth is presented as a "dated" bit of religious fantasy which is credible only to the credulous and which may be easily dismissed by modern man."¹⁸

The points of reference for the structure of the meaning of history in the Christian faith are obviously not found by an empirical analysis of the observable structures and coherences of

18. *Faith and History*, by Reinhold Niebuhr, Scribners, 1949, pp. 33, 34.

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history. They (the points of reference) are revelations apprehended by faith, of the character and purposes of God. The experience of faith by which they are apprehended is an experience at the ultimate limits of human knowledge; and it requires a condition of repentance which is a possibility for the individual, but only indirectly for nations and collectives.¹⁹

Niebuhr ridicules the faith that seeks to be founded upon the testimony of "revelatory facts" within ordinary history. He says of the resurrection that it was not empirical fact, but the subjective interpretation of the meaning behind the death of Jesus (cf. page 147-148 of "Faith and History" by Niebuhr). He says of the orthodox faith that it is a "faith not quite sure of itself," and ". . . always hopes to suppress its skepticism by establishing the revelatory depth of a fact through its miraculous character . . . this type of miracle is in opposition to true faith."²⁰

Some Results of the Existential Philosophy of History

This rationalistic theology has devastating effect on all aspects of historic Christianity. Hear what it has to say concerning the Christian hope!

The question of hope naturally involves our concept of the future and so the whole question of time and its meaning and the outcome of history is affected. Universalism finds its most striking expression in Barth's discussion of the Christian hope. Barth couches his theology in orthodox terms when he contends that our hope is to be fixed not on some Platonic idea but on solid historical fact. BUT WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED THAT BARTH CALLS A GENUINE HISTORICAL FACT? This is the all-important question. "Time and place are a matter of perfect indifference. Of what these eyes see it can really be equally well said that it was, is and will be, never and nowhere, and that it was, is and will be, always everywhere possible."²¹ Indeed a fact of history is, according to Barth, not genuinely such unless it is everywhere and always possible. It is this sort of fact that is everywhere and always happening. This is to say, the resurrection of Christ stands, in Barth's case, for the Idea of the general progress of the

19. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

21. *The New Modernism*, p. 339.

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human race toward Ideal perfection—the resurrection is everywhere and always happening.

Barth claims that fundamentalism has, by means of its doctrine of the direct revelation of God in the Incarnation of Jesus, limited God. We have bound God to His own revelation; He is no longer free, or wholly-Other. Barth speaks of God as being *contingently* present with man and it is only when God is thought of as contingently present with us that God Himself may become true history in us and with us. BUT DOES THIS FREE GOD OR DOES IT LIMIT HIM MORE THAN THE ORTHODOX THEOLOGY? To Barth we do not really exist except to the extent that we are contemporaneous with God. With such a philosophy as this it must also be true that God does not really exist except to the extent that He is contemporaneous with us. God is not Object—He is Subject. A real historical fact, according to Barth, therefore takes place only as an event, as a process of contingent contemporaneity of God with man and of man with God and that, subjectively.

Barth argues that history as such “is dumb”; it speaks with a chaos of voices mutually contradictory of one another. The space/time world is a world of no meaningful significance. Kant reduced the teachings of historic Christianity one by one to the level of illustrations of “eternal truths,” truths of reason. Barth does virtually the same thing. If there is to be a genuine resurrection, a resurrection that shall be everywhere and always possible to all men, there must be a burial in which the God of orthodoxy is buried. THERE MUST BE NO ANTECEDENT BEING OF ANY SORT IN THE THEOLOGY OF CRISIS! A fact, to be a real fact for Barth as for Kant, must be ultimately constructed by the autonomous mind. Only then can it ever be reconstructed, ever re-experienced by the dialectic. Thus the antecedent God must be buried.

The resurrection as a genuine historical fact then is, according to Barth, a process and such a process as includes the whole race. Moreover, the process is only beginning. It has not been finished at any point, nor will it be finished at any point in the future. It must always be a contemporaneous fact. For Barth, any fact that may possibly be finished at some future time on the calendar is no true historical fact. It would be a fact that could be fully revealed without being at the same time fully hidden. This simply destroys the Christian hope of the Second Coming. The existentialist can never say “Maranatha” as we say it.

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Does not Barth wed the very rationalism and scientism that he professes to divorce? Scientism will recognize no facts as facts unless they are universally verifiable, unless they can be tested by experience at any time. Barth holds that facts are not allowed as facts unless so pronounced by would-be autonomous man after the principle of an exhaustive, rational, dialectical process.

In all his irrationalism and subjectivism, Barth, like his philosopher predecessors, has but cleared the ground for a rationalism in which all difference between God and man is finally removed. Barth's theology leaves us without hope and without God.

The existential theology has come full circle in Reinhold Niebuhr and Rudolph Bultmann from its original reaction against rationalism and liberalism to a liberalism all its own. It is clearest, perhaps, in Bultmann's "demythologization" of the Scriptures. In view of the pervading spirit of scientific realism of our age, it becomes necessary for us, says Bultmann, to interpret the Christian message in terms that are relevant. All pre-scientific myths must be cut away such as the myth of the pre-existent Lord, the myths of heaven, hell, angels, miracles, virgin birth and the empty tomb and resurrection.

The death of Jesus of Nazareth, according to Bultmann, is not to be understood as the expiatory death of a substitute. That an incarnate divine being should cancel out the sins of men through his blood is, to Bultmann, "primitive mythology." However, one can believe in the cross of Christ, says Bultmann. "Its decisive, history-shaping significance is made apparent by the fact that it is effectual as an eschatological event; that is, it is not an event of the past, to which one looks back, but it is an eschatological event in time and beyond time, so far as it is understood in its significance, and insofar as it is always present for faith."²²

Bultmann also denies that the resurrection of Christ is an actual event. For Bultmann the existentialist interpretation of the New Testament is entirely independent of historical factuality. One must make a sharp distinction between "historical facts" and "historic encounter." The Christian *kerygma* of God's salvation in Jesus Christ has nothing to do with facts which may have happened in Palestine between A.D. 1 and 30. The "kerygmatic Christ" calls men "here and now" to the decision of faith. Faith is not to be

22. "Dare We Follow Bultmann?" by J. Schneider, in *Christianity Today*, June 5, 1961.

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understood as faith in the personal Saviour but means "emancipation from the past" and to come to true self-realization, true individuality.

"The existentialism of Bultmann is nothing more than a modern variation of that anthropocentrism which, beginning with the Enlightenment, has continued to plague theology, and according to which the standard of validity is seen in existential significance."²³ In other words, Bultmann is merely a modern extension of the Kantian, Hegelian, Kierkegaardian and Barthian enthroning of the Individual or autonomous man.

To Bultmann the cross of Jesus is merely a sign for the fact that it is worthwhile to bear one's own suffering willingly. The resurrection is merely the knowledge of the "meaning of the cross." For him the Second Coming of Christ is "rationally inconceivable."

For Bultmann the name Jesus Christ represents not a personal living reality of God's saving revelation in the sphere of history but merely a concept, an ideogram, a symbol or a principle for the event of contemporary preaching."²⁴

Bultmann's theology is no theology at all, but rather a philosophical wisdom in Christian garb. His "revelation" of God becomes a synonymous concept for the attainment of a new self-consciousness or understanding; but in no way does it mean the reality of an actual intervention of God in the historical world of space and time.

He strips the New Testament of all its power and authority and then sets out to transform society with the "real Jesus," the "demythologized New Testament." His philosophy, like the philosophies of his predecessors, is able to offer only the ego-centric, autonomous, empirical-Self which may, through the subjective leap become contingent with the Christ-Ideal. This is essentially the same thing that Liberalism offered and which the world found hopeless and powerless to transform men. The existential philosophy is doomed to failure for it lacks the only enduring and all-sufficient foundation, Jesus Christ, who is both historic man and at the same time the resurrected and transcendent Lord. It lacks that which is basically fundamental to a transforming power—trust in a Divine Personality who reveals Himself to man within the historic relativities of man's dimensions. It lacks also that other essential element of transforming power—

23. "Dare We Follow Bultmann?" by W. Kunneth, in *Christianity Today*, October 13, 1961.

24. *Ibid.*

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authority resident and available in a Personality higher and wiser than man himself.

In their efforts to overcome the rationalism of 19th century European theologians with irrationalism, the existentialists have become neo-rationalists rather than neo-orthodox. They do not *openly* deny the existence of God. They simply swing the pendulum of theology to the opposite extreme of rationality and irrationally demand a wholly-Other God who, because He must remain non-phenomenal to remain free, cannot reveal Himself in phenomenal history. Therefore the real man must contact God through an irrational leap—wholly subjective faith. Man's contact with God therefore must stand dependent upon man's inherent capabilities. So we have the autonomous man "creating" faith through the dialectical process moving toward his "self-chosen" Ideal.

Jesus of Nazareth was not God Incarnate for these theologians, but a symbolical picture, a "schematic analogy," of the self-chosen Ideal. The existential theology is as much of the spirit of anti-Christ as modernism, liberalism, agnosticism or the Gnosticism which was contemporary with John, who wrote, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus is not of God and this is the spirit of the anti-christ, whereof ye have heard that it cometh; and now it is in the world already" (I John 4:1-3).

The existential theology is in direct contradiction to the New Testament witness concerning the Incarnation. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Any sensible exegesis of this passage will not allow for the existential philosophy of history.

The existential theologians, by implication, call the New Testament writers liars . . . "That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life . . . declare we unto you . . ." (I John 1:1, 3).

Hopelessness is the progenitor of pessimism, epicureanism, materialism and all manner of sin while it goes about paralyzing any kind of transforming and enduring faith. Existentialism is father and mother of HOPELESSNESS!